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The President's Answer Implies Willingness to Raise the Stakes

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COVERT

President Reagan's rationale for employing covert action whenever and however needed is one of the most revealing statements of his presidency. Not because it comes as a particular surprise or even because it breaks precedent with his Oval Office predecessors in the postwar era. Each of them also sanctioned covert actions during their respective presidencies, and Reagan is correct when he says "covert actions have been a part of government and ... government's responsibilities for as long as there has been a government."

Reagan's remarks are revealing for other reasons.

By his emphasis on covert actions at the current combustible moment in world affairs, he implicitly accepts the calculated risk of intensifying tensions and suspicions instead of reducing them. His manner of answering a news conference question about clandestine military actions in Central America leaves no doubt that he endorses the use of such operations regardless of how they conflict with our treaty obligations to renounce that kind of illicit force in our foreign relations. And his unequivocal support for those sorts of U.S.-backed and financed military operations says a great deal about how he views the way they have worked in the past and how important he believes them to be in the future.

Because of the specific nature of the question he was asked and his equally direct reply to it, Reagan made his position unmistakably clear to our allies and adversaries around the world. Here's how the exchange went:

Q. Regarding the recent rebel attacks on a Nicaraguan oil depot, is it proper for the CIA to be involved in planning such attacks and supplying equipment for air raids? And do the American people have a right to be informed about any CIA role?

After giving a general endorsement of covert actions as a part of government's responsibilities, and refraining from commenting on "some of the specific operations down there," he went on to say, in labored syntax but clear meaning:

A... I do believe in the right of a country when it believes that its interests are best served to practice covert activity and then, while your people may have a right to know, you can't let your people know without letting the wrong people know. Those that are in opposition to what you're doing.

The problem involves something other than the obvious need for this government, and others, to engage in intelligence operations to preserve their own security. In the post-Pearl Harbor nuclear age, the gathering of intelligence and the monitoring of potential military opponents are essential to America's—and the world's—survival.

Revelations in recent years about assassination plots and other assorted crimes engaged in clandestinely by this government have tarnished the reputation of our intelligence agencies at home and abroad.

They have them all in the role of villains. Yet however frayed the cloak and however bent the dagger, this country owes a great debt to the dedicated people who have performed thankless and dangerous jobs throughout the world. And we are going to need more of their best talents in the years to come.

But there is a vital distinction between covert intelligence-gathering, from a variety of sources and through a number of means, and covert military actions. The history of those has been dismal. The invasion to topple Fidel Castro at the Bay of Pigs in 1961,

the Iranian desert mission to rescue our hostages in 1980, both resulted in failure. Together, they contributed to a growing cynicism about the reality of U.S. words and deeds.

In order to cover up those large-scale military endeavors, leaders were forced to lie to their own people.

As one of the leading participants in the Bay of Pigs operation of a generation ago remarked when that covert action ended in disaster:

"The trouble was that we were acting like an old whore and trying to pretend that we were just the sweet young girl we used to be."

Morality and the climate of public opinion are not the only reasons to question these kinds of covert military operations. Practical considerations exist.

Preoccupation with military actions—commando raids, air attacks, landings, full-scale combat or what have you—inevitably places greater emphasis on the techniques of battle than the talents of diplomacy, on the fighting skills of those we back secretly as opposed to the political abilities of those who ultimately will have to govern publicly. The real question is not whether those we support win, but whether they can fashion a political triumph after their military victory.

There, the record is bleak. We have been preoccupied with short-term military aspects centered around a negative anti-communism instead of pointing toward the future by planning and helping others achieve democratic governments.

The president's latest remarks suggest that when it comes to choosing between light and darkness, he prefers the shadows.